

3.0 WATERFRONT PARKS

3.1 BENNETT PARK

DESCRIPTION

Bennett Beach is a special place along the eastern shoreline of Lake Erie, having one of the last remaining natural sand beaches and dunes. This unique lakefront park is approximately 50 acres in size and is located in the Town of Evans. Old Lakeshore Road splits the park into two halves, with the western half as “beach-related” open space and the remainder as an undeveloped natural wooded area. The park is also bisected from the northwest to the southeast by Big Sister Creek, which is an attractive fishing spot. A pedestrian bridge provides access from an existing parking area over to the beach. In general, the park is very flat, except for the large sand dunes and an 8’ high berm north of the bridge along the Creek.

Limited facilities exist at Bennett Beach, including a comfort station located at the parking area. The former Bennett Mansion was removed from the park a few years ago. Also, on the beach are old concrete foundation remains, approximately 30’ long, which act as a break wall against erosion (however, it may inhibit natural dune processes). The old Angola Water Treatment Facility sits abandoned just to the south of the Bennett Beach property.

PARK AND AREA HISTORY

Bennett Beach sits on the site of the old Bennett Estate. The property was originally acquired by the City of Buffalo, and more recently was acquired by Erie County. While most beaches along the eastern Lake Erie shoreline have either been destroyed, altered or are under private ownership, Bennett Beach is one of the very few publicly held waterfront parks in this part of the County. Bennett Beach still retains some of the historic landscape features that once were so common along the Lakeshore, including a natural sand beach and impressive sand dunes. In addition, there are back-dune wetlands remaining and the natural dynamics of Big Sister Creek’s outlet into the Lake.

EXISTING PARK FEATURES AND FACILITIES

- Restroom structure
- Pedestrian bridge
- Picnic area
- Natural sand beach and dunes
- Fishing access

It has been said that an “Old Growth” forest, with trees between 200 years and 500 years old, exists on the property immediately adjacent to the park to the north.

LOCAL CONTEXT

Bennett Beach is located approximately 23 miles south of downtown Buffalo, at the intersection of Old Lakeshore Road and Bennett Road. The beach-front property to both the north and south of Bennett Beach is primarily single family residential, with most housing options historically “summer” or “seasonal” cottages owned by people in the greater Buffalo area. Areas to the east of the park are generally low density, rural residential developments. Traveling south from Bennett Beach is the thickly settled hamlet of Lake Erie Beach (Evans), a popular summer resort area with a few seasonal commercial establishments. Recent years have seen more year round residents, as residential Lakefront property has become a very “hot” commodity. The lakefront areas to the north of Bennett Beach along Old Lakeshore Road are traditionally comprised of larger estates, many dating back to the early 1900s.

RECREATIONAL CONTEXT

Bennett Beach is a passive-oriented park, offering no structured playing fields or courts.

Wendt Beach is another County-owned lakefront park situated only one mile to the north of Bennett Beach. However, Wendt Beach is of a much different character, with the distinct and historic mansion setting, stony beach (non-sand), and the expansive soccer fields.

CURRENT ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

- *Bennett Beach does not appear to be maximizing its potential.*
- *The parking lot is poorly defined and in poor condition*
- *The existing restroom structure is inadequate and “out of character” for this beautiful lakefront setting*
- *The Old Concrete foundation on the beach is both an eyesore and a potential safety hazard in the future.*
- *The walk from the parking area to the beach is difficult on the ill-defined pathway.*



NEARBY PARKS WITH UNIQUE FEATURES
(WITHIN A 5-MILE RADIUS)

Town of Evans:

- Ayer-Stevenson Wildlife Sanctuary
A 20-acre wildlife sanctuary
- Evans Town Park
A resident-only beach park
- Lake Erie Beach Park
- Sturgeon Point Marina
Town owned and operated marina

Village of Angola:

- Point Breeze Campground
A private marina with camp sites
- Angola Rollercade

Town of Hanover:

- Evangola State Park
A 733-acre state park with beach access



MASTER PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

There are two potential development / redevelopment scenarios that are being considered for Bennett Beach Park in the Town of Evans. One scheme is based on a future acquisition by the County of the abandoned Water Treatment Facility adjacent to the park (at the end of Schwert Road); a second scheme assumes that the County will not acquire this facility.

ALTERNATE CONCEPT PLAN A (WITH WATER FACILITY ACQUISITION)

- *The County acquires the abandoned Water Treatment Facility, and undertakes an architectural / structural feasibility study of the building to review the most efficient and cost-effective measures for bringing the facility up to standards and appropriate park-related functions. A public-private partnership should be considered for this venture, including potentially bringing in an outside operator to establish this new facility. It is possible that it may cost more, given the building's current interior layout, to renovate/ rehabilitate the existing building rather than building a new facility. If total reconstruction is deemed the most practical method, the new structure should take advantage of the existing foundations and build on the current footprint (Also minimizing any disturbance to the lakefront setting).*
 - A new beach related facility in this strategic location on the beach could serve numerous needs and functions for Bennett Beach Park, including restrooms, changing rooms, concessions/restaurant, lifeguard station, potential storage, etc.
 - This new facility should offer large outdoor patio spaces for people to enjoy the magnificent beach experience and views, including even those who do not partake in beach related activities, including some Sr. citizens, persons with certain disabilities, etc.
 - Interpretive and educational information should be included to tell the story of the natural shoreline conditions of Lake Erie. Possible meeting rooms could be included for environmental education classes, i.e. an on-site laboratory.

ALTERNATE CONCEPT PLAN B (WITHOUT WATER FACILITY ACQUISITION)

- *Similar to the current park situation, a new beach facility would not be an option on the site of the water treatment facility. However, the existing restroom facility at the park is substandard and inappropriate for current park needs, and thus it is recommended that a new facility be built on or near the site of the former Bennett House.*
 - This facility and siting would have a similar relationship to the newly constructed Beach/Bath House at Woodlawn Beach State Park, and would be strategically located between the parking lot and the beach.
 - Park-goers would proceed to the beach past, or through, the new facility on the way to and from the beach, offering restrooms, changing rooms, concessions and lockers, etc.
 - An outdoor patio/deck could overlook the beautiful “back dunes” setting and Big Sister Creek.
 - Under this scenario, it is recommended that a secondary shelter (“half-way” house) be built over the bridge along the boardwalk system, to offer people a spot to sit and rest, or take in some shade, on the way to the beach.
 - Interpretive and educational information should be included to tell the story of the natural shoreline conditions of Lake Erie. Possible meeting rooms could be included for environmental education classes, i.e. an on-site laboratory.



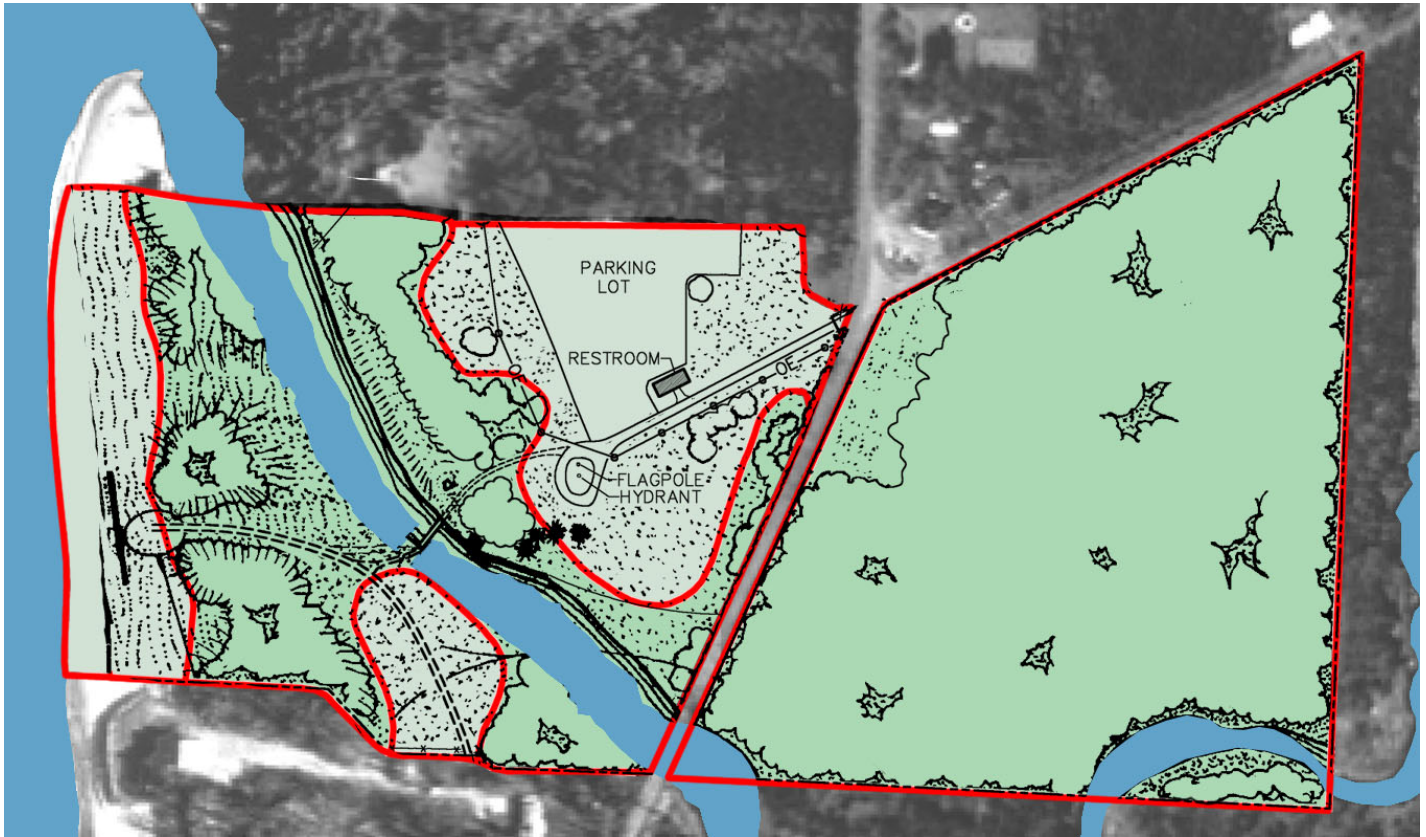
GENERAL IMPROVEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS (FOR EITHER SCENARIO ABOVE)

- *Establish an ADA accessible boardwalk system through the existing “cut” in the natural sand dune to reduce further impacts and degradation to one of the last surviving natural sand dunes on the eastern Lake Erie Shoreline. This new boardwalk would allow for dune reinstatement/restoration, and would prevent further water erosion and debris build-up following every major storm along the lake.*
- *Incorporate new backshore beach activities, i.e. first aid/lifeguard station, and potential rentals (wind surfers, kayaks); Introduce Volleyball Courts (sand and/or grass) and other beach-related activities into the recreational mix.*
- *Preserve and enhance overall dune environment;*

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- incorporate new beach grasses and vegetation on the front side of the dune to assure long-term sustainability.*
- *Establish picnic groves on east side of creek;*
 - *Enhance winter use of site, including sledding off the back side of the sand dune and the incorporation of a low flat lawn area for skating activities.*
 - *Consider the unsafe conditions at the current entrance/ intersection; relocate the park entrance road to the south for better site distances and safety;*
 - *Reorganize and beautify parking area; consider using a natural crushed stone surface as a more environmentally friendly surface material.*
 - *Given the three distinct zones of the park (beach, back of dune to creek area, and between the creek and road), provide emergency access through the water treatment facility area (Schwert Road) to the beach, off Schwert Road for the back-dunes, and off Lakeshore Road for the main park area;*
 - *Establish a unique backshore/back of dune nature area with a traditional wetland and nature trail. This could be enhanced through environmental education and interpretive signage opportunities;*
 - *Increase and enhance fishing opportunities and access points along Big Sister Creek. Establish and maintain riparian corridor;*
 - *Maintain area east of Old Lakeshore Road as nature reserve. Provide limited trail access through this natural area to offer access to the Creek.*
 - *Offer interpretive opportunities about the Lakefront environment, harsh weather conditions, dune restoration, creek habitat, local history, Bennett House history, etc. An entire signage package should be developed, similar to that at Woodlawn Beach.*
 - *Establish a stronger linkage between Bennett Beach and the local community through new sidewalks and/or trails, streetscape enhancements, wayfinding signage, maps, etc.; Provide clear linkages from Bennett Beach to area bicycle routes and trails. This is a strong, tight-knit lakefront community that comes alive in the summer months.*
 - *Establish a more dominant gateway into the park from Old Lakeshore Road.*

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- Consider a “Corporate Sponsorship” program which encourages local businesses from getting more involved with the Park, including sponsoring certain events, upgrading park features, setting up an interpretive signage program, etc.
 - Reduce lawn mowing to provide more natural setting in non-use, little-trafficked areas, and help to shift park maintenance towards other needed tasks.
 - Provide appropriate new native tree plantings and other indigenous vegetation throughout the park.

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Legend

- Nature Reserve Zone
- Recreation Zone
- Heritage Zone
- Service Zone
- Zone Boundary

Nature Reserve Zones

Includes significant natural features or areas that require management to ensure the long-term protection of the natural heritage, i.e. woodlands, wetlands, natural open space areas (meadows), waterways, ravines, gorges and escarpment faces, steep slopes, etc.

Recreation Zones (Active and Passive)

Includes the 'maintained' landscape areas of the parks in which facilities development is permitted to support low to moderate intensity recreation activities, i.e. sports fields, specialized activities, picnic areas, campgrounds, parking lots, etc.

Heritage Zones

Includes areas of significant cultural heritage or archaeological features that require management to ensure the preservation of these important heritage assets.

Service Zones

Includes maintenance and service areas for the developed parks, as well as access points or staging areas within the Conservation Parks (e.g. trailheads and parking lots) where minimal use facilities are needed to support allowable uses within the Nature Reserve Zone.



Bennett Beach Park MANAGEMENT ZONES

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES / PARK SPECIFIC ACTIONS

PRIORITY KEY

- S Short Term *(1 - 3 years)*
- M Mid Term *(4 - 10 years)*
- L Long Term *(11 - 20+ years)*
- O Ongoing *(Continuing Efforts each year)*